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UNCLAS TEGUCIGALPA 001594

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/PPC, DRL/PHD, AND DS
STATE FOR INL/LP, INR/I, INR/C, INR/AN/IAA, EB, AND CA
DOJ FOR NDIC/ORGANIZED CRIME AND VIOLENCE UNIT (LCASALE)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY: RASH OF POLICE

KILLINGS AROUND HONDURAS - 39 MURDERED FROM JANUARY TO JULY

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 1488

1. According to the Honduran Government, 39 Honduran police officers have been murdered this year, five in the last week of July, some in spectacularly gruesome fashion. In some of the murder cases, captured suspects have been linked to gangs, and speculation is rampant that the vast majority of the killings are related to gang violence. The killings have also sparked responses from the presidential candidates and may play into electoral politics in the coming months.

2. All around the country, but particularly in the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, a wave of police killings has been garnering headlines. Several of the murders have been extraordinarily gruesome, and local papers report police suspicions that the murders are an attempt by organized crime to terrorize the country's police officers. Post previously reported grenade attacks against police stations in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, crimes which may also have been perpetrated by gangs (see reftel).

3. Comment: With the presidential campaign heating up, the issue of security can be expected to play a prominent role. National Party candidate Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa, currently President of the National Congress, trumpets security as one of his main themes. He supports instituting the death penalty and has used the cop killings to highlight the barbaric nature of crimes he believes merit capital punishment. Lobo's opponent, Liberal Party candidate Jose Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, opposes the death penalty and has criticized Lobo, accusing him of wanting to kill every criminal in the country rather than combat the causes of crime. Local press coverage of the police killings has been overwhelmingly sympathetic, portraying the victims as fallen heroes and repeating allegations of gang involvement. If that sympathy for the victims and concern over gang involvement carries over into general public opinion, Lobo (the "tough on crime" candidate) may experience an up-tick in support as a result. It also appears to be translating into strong congressional support for amending the penal code to make murders of security officials a crime meriting a life sentence, rather than the current 30-year maximum sentence for murder. End comment.
Tuebner